

This summer I sat down with a farmer on the front porch of his farmhouse in the heart of Nebraska's cattle country. This farmer has seen it all. We talked about the current drought and those of the past, cattle prices, input costs, biofuels, and all the complex things that make up modern agriculture. Overlooking cornfields and blue sky, our discussion was far removed from the halls of Congress, but we in Nebraska understand the importance of agriculture – one of our economy's few bright spots - to our nation's well-being.

Last week, Congress left Washington without reauthorizing a new "Farm Bill," the overarching policy that directs the administration of our nation's farm, conservation, and nutrition programs. Enacted in 2008, the current Farm Bill expires this Sunday (farm legislation typically spans over a five-year period).

The U.S. Senate passed its version of new farm policy back in June. The House Agriculture Committee, on which I serve, advanced its own Farm Bill proposal in July. Though the bill wasn't perfect, I supported it as an opportunity to chart a new way forward for America's farmers and ranchers while still respecting the federal government's severe budgetary constraints. I was hopeful our proposal would receive a vote before the entire House of Representatives so we could move forward in sending a five-year Farm Bill to the President. Unfortunately, a House vote did not take place and Congress left town with the current Farm Bill set to expire.

Many Nebraskans are now asking about the consequences of this inaction and what it means for farmers and rural communities. You may have heard that if we do not enact new farm policy by the end of this year, the United States will revert back to "Permanent Law," which is the 1938 and 1949 statutes—clearly written for another era. The most immediate impacts would be on dairy and certain conservation management programs, which are based on the calendar year. Commodity programs are covered under the expiring Farm Bill until the next harvest. The next winter wheat crop will be the first affected. Current Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts will not be affected, nor will crop insurance coverage for farmers.

Although the current uncertainty about the bill is not preferable for planning purposes, Congress has a few more months to pass a new Farm Bill. Clearly, it is better to act on a five-year bill. Congress may also choose to extend the current Farm Bill, but then the reforms and budget savings achieved in the new proposal will be lost.

Agriculture is critical to America's economic security, energy security, and national security. Farm policy goes beyond farms, farmers, and rural America – it benefits all of America. We have the lowest food prices in the world, we export and provide food to others, we create clean energy from homegrown sources, and we encourage environmentally responsible management practices that protect and conserve natural resources. A reasonable long-term Farm Bill plays an important role in these efforts, helping farmers manage risks, plan for productive harvests, and uphold the strong outcomes and traditions of the American agriculture community.